

Gender and E-Service in CEE and the CIS

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INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technology is used today as a tool for reducing all kinds of poverty, promoting good governance, and facilitating sustainable human development. NGOs and other practitioners call this ICTD. One example of ICTD is to use different software, e-services, to promote good governance, business and reduce income and non-income poverty. However, there is a risk of ICT imposing new divides. The gender digital divide is a severe and increasing problem. The gender digital divide is the problem of ICTs, regardless of regional variations, affecting men and women differently. Women in most regions face barriers in benefiting from the development of ICT.

During the past few years, the ICT and gender movement and research on the topic has grown globally, but in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) it has remained weak and without recognition (Simerska & Fialova, 2004). It is important to ask whether women in CEE and the CIS are using the new services and what roles women play within the growing e-service in business and governance in the region. This article describes the situation on women and ICTs in the CEE and CIS and will additionally highlight the potential of ICTs in promoting gender equality.

BACKGROUND

The use of ICTs is becoming increasingly inevitable, and a necessary part of everyday life. More widespread and more affordable than ever this propensity is expected to increase in the future. Researchers such as Pippa Norris have analysed and described the impact of ICT and the importance it has in societies. Norris points out that ICT and e-service

applications creates new economic and social opportunities all over the world (Norris, 2001). The report of the Digital Opportunity Initiative exemplifies this by pointing out e-service applications as an important enabler of economic development (Accenture, 2001). These changes however, do not reach or benefit all sectors of society equally. This is the digital divide. Action lines from the 2003 World Summit on the Information Society highlighted that national and international political action must be taken in order for ICT to reduce traditional barriers in society and provide an opportunity for everyone to access local and global markets (WSIS, 2003).

Research by Hafkin (2003), and Huyer and Sikoska (2003), among others, show that, regardless of regional variations, the development of new e-services can affect men and women differently, creating what is known as the gender digital divide. However, they also highlight that ICT can be an important enabler of women's participation and empowerment. Huyer state that if ICT is to become an important enabler for women in the CEE and CIS there is need of promoting political action (Huyer, 2003). Huyer (2003) therefore concludes that ICTs can have a positive impact on gender equality, however, they can sustain or exacerbate inequalities if targeted actions (including policies, regulations, projects, and initiatives) are not taken.

Girard and Ó Siochru (2003) conclude in their research that, since ICT applications alone are unlikely to make a positive contribution to gender equality, there is a need for actions that promote gender issues with ICT applications. This is crucial in the CEE and CIS region because in several countries in region women are totally excluded from ICTs. (Simerska & Fiavola, 2004) These imbalances between men's and women's participation in ICTs can be found in several areas. Such as for example access to, education, decision-making, and content.

RESEARCH AND DATA

Little research has been done in the CEE and the CIS region in the field of gender and ICTs. The most recent UN-report, by Simerska and Fialova (2004) indicate that women use and benefit less from ICT applications such as e-services than men. Except for that report, most surveys in the region are carried out by private companies as market surveys for business purposes. However, these reports are just indications and they advocate for deeper research. One of the main problems is the shortage of gender disaggregated official data to measure the extent of which women are using or being supported by e-services. Few countries in the CEE and the CIS region have access to, create data, or undertake field research, which is a problem that needs to be addressed. Despite the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) recognizing this problem at a meeting in Geneva in June 2003, country specific gender data is still not available. A problem with the available data is the lack of standard definitions. Due to this, most research and data discussed in this article are on ICTs in general, not on e-services specifically. Another problem concerning research is that perceptions of women in the region have not been well documented (Hafkin, 2003). Furthermore, the lack of disaggregated data, the lack of standard definitions and the lack of documented perceptions of women results in little fact-based evidence to support and explain the indications of imbalances between men and women that are reported.

ACCESS AND EDUCATION

According to ITU, the number of telephone subscribers has increased from 14.1 per 100 inhabitants to 44.1 per 100 inhabitants in the CEE and CIS region (WSIS, 2003). Over the past three years, the use of Internet has grown by 117.5 % in the CEE and CIS.¹ These figures indicate that the use of communication channels as Internet and Mobile phones will increase in the future. The possibilities of accessing new ICTs are rapidly increasing globally and regionally, these possibilities should be shared equally. International reports show a different picture, women have less access to ICTs than men (Scott, 2003, Simerska & Fialova, 2004).

Even if you have access to ICT, you need to know how to use it. Hafkin and Taggart describes education as an important factor in raising the use of ICTs among women (2001). However, women's tertiary education in ICTs in the region constitutes a tangible disturbing issue. Figures from ITU (WSIS, 2003) show that in the new member states of the European Union,² 83% of men and 13% of women participate in ICT related tertiary education. Indications from small surveys done in a few CIS countries also signal these kinds of inequalities. These surveys further show that this is one explanation to why women use Internet significantly less than men (Scott, Singh, & Wanasundera, 2001; Hafkin & Taggart, 2001). Hafkin and Taggart (2001) conclude that these inequalities are severe and actions to promote and encourage women to consider a career in ICT must therefore be taken. The rapid growth of and the education inequalities in ICTs highlights the need for immediate actions to ensure equality in both access to and education in these services. Otherwise the gender digital divide might increase.

DECISION MAKING AND CONTENT

In both the public and the private sphere, the main problem is not only women's access to and education in ICTs, but also the structural exclusion of women from the creation and innovation processes of new e-services and decision-making processes. Hafkin (2003) points out an interesting note; there seems to be no correlation between the percentage of female internet users and women's empowerment. The lack of correlation between women's use of Internet and expected empowerment indicators support the hypothesis that most women that use the Internet are not representative of women in the country as a whole, they represent a small elite (Hafkin & Taggart, 2001, p. 15). It also shows that if a country only focus on access they will not automatically raise women's empowerment. This indicates that access is not the only problem concerning women's use of ICTs.

As e-services are becoming more and more important as tools integrated in all parts of society, ICT skills in power and decision-making positions are important. Every leader has special competences and skills, but basic ICT competences are becoming

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